

Skim (2008)

By Mariko Tamaki
Illustrated by Jillian Tamaki

Rationale by Louann Reid

Grade Level and Audience

This graphic novel is recommended for students in high-school English classes, as well as health or social-studies classes.

Plot Summary

Kimberly Keiko Cameron, a sixteen-year-old Japanese Canadian girl, attends a private single-sex school in Toronto in 1993. She tells her story of first love, loss, friendship, and depression through diary entries, black and white pictures, and commentary. Nicknamed Skim because she is “not slim” (26), she adopts this descriptor for herself throughout the book until she signals her increased confidence at the end by reclaiming “Kim.”

Skim’s parents are separated, and she lives with her mother, who is emotionally unavailable, possibly worn out from the “medical drama” of her husband’s two heart attacks in the previous year. Her father describes her mother as “a cold cynical woman who has no appreciation for a broken heart.” Breaks and break ups are an important motif. The book opens with Skim trying to write with a cast on her broken arm; classmate Katie’s boyfriend breaks up with her, and later, she breaks both arms and an ankle when she slips from the roof of her house; and Skim and her best friend, Lisa, gradually break off their friendship as they find new interests and new friends. The largest break, though, is that between Skim and her English teacher, Ms. Archer, with whom she has fallen in love. After seeming to return her affection, Ms. Archer tells Skim they can no longer meet and she eventually leaves the school. Because these events are told through Skim’s eyes, we know only what she knows about the situation, leaving unanswered questions about the reasons for Ms. Archer’s departure and any role school officials might have played in her decision.

There are many unanswered questions for Skim. Was Katie’s boyfriend really gay or is that just a rumor? Why did he commit suicide? What do her dreams mean? Why didn’t Ms. Archer tell her she was leaving? Although Skim looks for answers from Wicca, a Magic 8 Ball, and Tarot cards, all disappoint her. When Ms. Archer leaves, she concludes “Being sixteen is officially the worst thing I’ve ever been” (103).

Despite the struggles and depression, Skim concludes her diary somewhat optimistically. “Goodbye (Hello)” titles the last section of the book. She becomes good friends with Katie, and she bleaches her hair for a school dance, which looks “sunny” according to Katie. She has more complex insights about relationships: “I guess I always thought of Katie Matthews as being heartbroken. But maybe it’s way more complicated than that. I

mean, there's heartbroken and then there's all the stuff that comes each second after that, depending on who broke your heart" (129). When Lisa tells her about being in love with Sam, a new boyfriend, Skim's responses reveal that she not only understands the complexity of heartbreak, but also how love, especially first love, can change a person. At the end of the story, she appears to be headed to a meeting in the woods with Katie, her new friend, and the final image in the book, alone on a page, is of a "cootie catcher." This origami fortune-telling device suggests that a wealth of possibilities lie ahead for this insightful young woman.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

This is a compelling coming-of-age story with a protagonist who makes sense of the large and small events in her life and determines how they will affect her future. The deft touch of the Tamaki cousins, author and illustrator, ensures that although the story deals with suicide, separation, and loss, it does not descend into melodrama. Instead, words and images are placed in counterpoint to each other, creating a tone that is serious but not somber, relieved by moments of insight, wit, and sardonic humor. Parallel narrative voices deepen the complexity of the story. In some of the novel's most important scenes, Skim's thoughts appear on top of an image while her words appear in speech balloons.

Possible Objections

The text deals with many of the topics adolescents must confront as they become adults—suicide, sexuality, and changing friendships. Any materials containing the first of these two topics, as well as witchcraft and fortunetelling, which also figure prominently in the book, are often challenged in schools and libraries. When Katie's boyfriend commits suicide, the school counselor thinks that Skim might be suicidal because she is part of the "gothic" culture and therefore "prone to depression and depressing stimuli." Skim comments for the reader, "Truthfully I am always a little depressed but that is just because I am sixteen and everyone is stupid (ha-ha-ha). I doubt it has anything to do with being a goth." Later in the book, this suicide is connected to the topic of sexuality when Lisa insists that the boy killed himself because he was gay. Skim seems to accept her own attraction to Ms. Archer, although she also makes a defensive comment when Lisa questions how much help Skim is receiving outside of class. Some community members might also object to the portrayal of Wicca and fortunetelling. These avenues to understanding all seem to fall short, but Skim turns to them frequently. The image of Skim and Ms. Archer kissing may be objectionable to some, and the word "fuck" appears occasionally.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

Skim is reading *Romeo and Juliet* in her English class, and star-crossed love comes to have more meaning for her as the story progresses. A class studying Shakespeare's play could see a contemporary treatment of star-crossed love and debate whether "star crossed" could describe any of the pairs in *Skim*.

Skim could be read as one of a group of novels dealing with sexuality, suicide, or coming of age. The suggested readings that follow provide varied perspectives on the topics so that teens can enrich their understanding through exploring multiple perspectives.

Chinese Handcuffs by Chris Crutcher and *Tunnel Vision* by Fran Arrick both deal with those left behind when someone commits suicide. In Crutcher's novel, sixteen-year-old Dillon Hemingway must deal with the emotions and changed relationships that result from the suicide of his older brother. Arrick focuses on the emotions—bewilderment, guilt, anger, and so forth—of the family and friends that fifteen-year-old Anthony leaves behind when he hangs himself but does not leave a note.

Questioning one's sexuality plays a large role in *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden and *Peter* by Kate Walker. Although it was groundbreaking in 1982, *Annie* may seem a little dated now. Nonetheless, the story of Liza and Annie who are first friends and then lovers still rings true. Liza's struggle to accept herself and the relationship are realistic, and the relationship the girls have with two teachers is helpfully different from the one *Skim* has with her teacher. Kate Walker's *Peter* struggles with the pressure to be macho, and he is appalled that he is attracted to his older brother's friend who is gay. He candidly shares his confusion, and the reader gains insight into the complexity of understanding sexuality. Both books underscore the importance of remaining true to self, which is also a strong theme in *Skim*.

Coming of age is a ubiquitous theme in literature not only in Canada and the United States but also around the world. High-school curricula at all grade levels already include fiction on this topic, and students could be encouraged to compare the development of the topic in several works including *Skim*. An excellent collection of short stories for readers ready for complexity in style and topic is *Into the Widening World: International Coming-of-Age Stories*, collected by John Loughery. A collection of compelling stories by authors of books for young adults is *Join In: Multiethnic Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults* edited by Donald R. Gallo. The graphic novels *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* by Marjane Satrapi portray coming of age during political turmoil and offer a distinctively different drawing style; students could compare the stories and styles of *Persepolis* and *Skim*.

Ideas for Implementation

Using *Skim* as one of several choices for literature circles would allow students to delve deeply into a central theme while contributing their insights about specific aspects of the theme. "Decisions and Consequences in Adolescence" would encompass the three major themes in *Skim* and the texts suggested in "Thematic Braiddings."

Begin with a pre-reading activity that gets students thinking about the topic and ready to explore its many facets. Ask students to create a T-chart with "Decisions" as the left column and "Consequences" as the right. They should put their name or the name of an adolescent character from literature or popular media on the top of the chart. By using a name other than their own, students who prefer not to disclose personal information can

still complete the activity. If students have read *Romeo and Juliet*, they might use one of the characters from that play for this activity. Next, have students individually list as many decisions and consequences they can think of in three minutes. Discuss as a class some examples and, if possible, draw out the idea that there could be several consequences for any decision. Extend students' thinking by discussing the factors that influence decisions and consequences, such as family background, personal beliefs, peer pressure, and so on. After the discussion, ask students to take five minutes to write or draw the major points of the discussion. They should keep these points in mind as they read their books or short stories in small groups.

Information about using literature circles in the classroom is available on the Web and in books. A good summary website is <http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/promising/tips/tipcircles.html>. Information on this site is based on the book by Harvey Daniels, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*, published by Stenhouse. A somewhat different approach that has worked well with middle- and high-school students is described in Cindy O'Donnell-Allen's *Book Club Companion*, available from Heinemann.

Awards¹

2009 ALA Notables - Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults
2009 ALA Notables - Top Ten Great Graphic Novels for Teens
2009 Canadian Children's Book Centre - Best Books for Kids and Teens
2009 Doug Wright Award - Best Book
2009 Texas Maverick Graphic Novels Reading List
2008 YALSA Best Books for Young Adults
2008 YALSA Great Graphic Novels
2008 Ignatz Award - Outstanding Graphic Novel
2008 PW Best Books of the Year - Comics
2008 Bloomsbury Review's Editors' Favourite Books
2008 New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Books Award

Reviews

"Skim is an unforgettable character in the tradition of Holden Caulfield—a clear social commentator on adult and adolescent behaviour whose ironic observations on social hypocrisy ring sharp and true.

Illustrator Jillian Tamaki's fine draughtsmanship gives *Skim* a classic elegance that's missing in many other graphic novels. The italic font evokes the hand-written script of a diary, with words often crossed out and new ones added, revealing Skim's changing emotions. The monochromatic pen and ink drawings build an atmosphere of shadow and light as characters are portrayed dramatically against blocks of grey and intense black washes. Tamaki's drawings are fluid and loose, creatively employing elements such as dialogue balloons and lines to show movement. The panels vary dynamically in size and

placement, using unusual diagonal framing, bird's-eye perspectives, and close-ups to portray adolescent turmoil.” – Judith Saltman, *Quille & Quire*²

“The careful layering of perception, desire and reality is handled so deftly that the effect is almost subliminal . . . Stories by or about adolescents have a tendency towards the didactic, and it could be said that there are lessons in *Skim*, but they are too complex to be easily summarised. The Tamakis have done the hardest and most rewarding thing an artist can do: they have captured the texture of real life and made it into something beautiful.” – Katherine Farmar, *The Irish Times*³

“Jillian has a swooping, gorgeous pen line—expressive, vibrant, and precise all at once. Her renderings of Skim and her friends, Skim alone, or just the teenage environment in which the story is steeped are evocative and wondrous . . . *Skim* is an unusually strong graphic novel—rich in visuals and observations, and rewarding of repeated readings,” – *Publishers Weekly*⁴

“The fake diary is by now a tired cliché of teen novels, but Jillian Tamaki's artwork elevates the genre from the merely voyeuristic. We don't just read Skim's diary entries; we see what she erases, what she lies about, and what she has no words for. The black-and-white art is spare when Skim's life is under control; it's lush and packed with dense shading as she expands her horizons. Mariko Tamaki supplies brittle, Juno MacGuff-style repartee, but she also allows Skim to acknowledge the changes she is experiencing, even if she doesn't quite understand them: ‘I think I'm in love. Being in love is not what I expected.’” – June Thomas, *Slate*⁵

“With honesty and compassion, this innovative narrative communicates a life just beginning, open and full of possibility.” – Claire E. Gross⁶

Resources/References

Brenner, Robin. “Review of *Skim*.” Posted December 15, 2008.
<http://www.teenreads.com>.

Jillian Tamaki Sketchbook. Last Modified March 9, 2010.
<http://www.jilliantamaki.com/sketchbook/labels/skim.html>.

Mariko Tamaki home page:
Mariko Tamaki. Accessed October 11, 2010.
<http://marikotamaki.com>.

Suzette Chan. “This Is the Story of Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki. So Read On.” *Sequential Tart*. Posted December 15, 2008. <http://www.sequentialtart.com>.

¹ All award information from http://www.groundwoodbooks.com/gw_titles.cfm?pub_id=1233&type=new

² http://www.quillandquire.com/books_young/review.cfm?review_id=5989

³ Farmar, Katherine. “Capturing the Complexity of Kim’s World.” *The Irish Times*. July 18, 2009. Weekend Section; Book Reviews; p. 10. Retrieved from Lexis/Nexis June 1, 2010.

⁴ *Publishers Weekly*, February 4, 2008, p. 44.

⁵ <http://www.slate.com/id/2186190>

⁶ Gross, Claire E. *Horn Book* (starred review). July/Aug. 2008, pp. 459-460.